Russian Short Stories

A Slav Soul

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A Slav Soul by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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The farther I go back in my memory of the past, and the nearer I get to remembering incidents connected with my childhood, the more confused and doubtful do my recollections become. Much, no doubt, was told me afterwards, in a more conscious stage of my existence, by those who, with loving care, noticed my early doings. Perhaps many of the things that I recall never happened to me; I heard or read them some time or other and their remembrance grew to be part of myself. Who can guarantee which of these recollections are of real facts and which of tales told so long ago that they have all the appearance of truth—who can know where one ends and the other begins?

My imagination recalls with special vividness the eccentric figure of Yasha and the two companions—I might almost call them friends—who accompanied him along the path of life: Matsko, an old rejected cavalry horse, and the yard-dog Bouton.

Yasha was distinguished by the deliberate slowness of his speech and actions, and he always had the air of a man whose thoughts were concentrated on himself. He spoke very seldom

and considered his speech; he tried to speak good Russian, though at times when he was moved he would burst out in his native dialect of Little-Russian. Owing to his dress of a dark colour and sober cut, and to the solemn and almost melancholy expression of his shaven face and thin pursed lips, he always gave the impression that he was an old servant of a noble family of the good old times.

Of all the human beings that he knew, Yasha seemed to find my father the only one besides himself worthy of his veneration. And though to us children, to my mother, and to all our family and friends, his manner was respectful, it was mingled with a certain pity and slighting condescension. It was always an enigma to me—whence came this immeasurable pride of his. Servants have often a well-known form of insolence; they take upon themselves some of that attractive authority which they have noticed in their masters. But my father, a poor doctor in a little Jewish village, lived so modestly and quietly that Yasha could never have learnt from him to look down upon his neighbours. And in Yasha himself there was none of the ordinary insolence of a servant—he had no metropolitan polish and could not overawe people by using foreign words, he had no overbearing manners towards country chambermaids, no gentle art of tinkling out touching romances on the guitar, an art by which so many inexperienced souls have been ruined. He occupied his leisure hours in lying in sheer idleness full-length on the box in which he kept his belongings. He not only did not read books, but he sincerely despised them. All things written, except in the Bible, were, in his opinion, written not for truth's

sake but just to get money, and he therefore preferred to any book those long rambling thoughts which he turned over in his mind as he lay idly on his bed.

Matsko, the horse, had been rejected from military service on account of many vices, the chief of which was that he was old, far too old. Then his forelegs were crooked, and at the places where they joined the body were adorned with bladder-like growths; he strutted on his hind legs like a cock. He held his head like a camel, and from old military habit tossed it upward and thrust his long neck forward. This, combined with his enormous size and unusual leanness, and the fact that he had only one eye, gave him a pitiful warlike and seriocomic expression. Such horses are called in the regiments "stargazers."

Yasha prized Matsko much more than Bouton, who sometimes displayed a frivolity entirely out of keeping with his size. He was one of those shaggy, long-haired dogs who at times remind one of ferrets, but being ten times as large, they sometimes look like poodles; they are by nature the very breed for yard-dogs. At home Bouton was always overwhelmingly serious and sensible in all his ways, but in the streets his behaviour was positively disgraceful. If he went out with my father he would never run modestly behind the carriage as a well-behaved dog should do. He would rush to meet all other dogs, jump about them and bark loudly in their very noses, only springing away to one side in affright if one of them with a snort of alarm bent his head quickly and tried to bite him. He ran into other people's yards and came tearing out again after a second or so,

chased by a dozen angry dogs of the place. He wandered about on terms of deepest friendship with dogs of a known bad reputation.

In our districts of Podolia and Volhynia nothing was thought so much of as a person's way of setting out from his house. A squire might long since have mortgaged and re-mortgaged his estate, and be only waiting for the officers of the Crown to take possession of his property, but let him only on a Sunday go out to "Holy Church," it must be in a light tarantass drawn by four or six splendid fiery Polish horses, and driving into the market square of the village he must cry to the coachman—"Lay on with the whip, Joseph." Yet I am sure that none of our rich neighbours started off in such pomp as Yasha was able to impart to our equipage when my father made up his mind to journey forth. Yasha would put on a shining hat with a shade in front and behind, and a broad yellow belt. Then the carriage would be taken out about a hundred yards from the house—an antique coach of the old Polish days—and Matsko put in. Hardly would my father show himself at the house-door than Yasha would give a magnificent crack with his whip, Matsko would wave his tail some time in hesitation and then start at a sober trot, flinging out and raising his hind legs, and strutting like a cock. Coming level with the house-door Yasha would pretend that only with great difficulty could he restrain the impatient horses, stretching out both his arms and pulling back the reins with all his might. All his attention would seem to be swallowed up by the horses, and whatever might happen elsewhere round about him, Yasha would never turn his head.

Probably he did all this to sustain our family honour.

Yasha had an extraordinarily high opinion of my father. It would happen upon occasion that some poor Jew or peasant would be waiting his turn in the anteroom while my father was occupied with another patient. Yasha would often enter into a conversation with him, with the simple object of increasing my father's popularity as a doctor.

"What do you think?" he would ask, taking up a position of importance on a stool and surveying the patient before him from head to foot. "Perhaps you fancy that coming to my master is like asking medical advice of the clerk at the village police-station. My master not only stands higher than such a one, brother, but higher than the chief of police himself. He knows about everything in the world, my brother. Yes, he does. Now, what's the matter with you?"

"There's something wrong with my inside…" the sick person would say, "my chest burns. …"

"Ah, you see—what causes that? What will cure you? You don't know, and I don't. But my master will only throw a glance at you and he'll tell you at once whether you'll live or die."

Yasha lived very economically, and he spent his money in buying various things which he carefully stored away in his large tin-bound wooden trunk. Nothing gave us children greater pleasure than for Yasha to let us look on while he turned out these things. On the inside of the lid of the trunk were pasted pictures of various kinds. There, side by side with portraits of terrifying green-whiskered generals who had fought

for the fatherland, were pictures of martyrs, engravings from the *Neva*, studies of women's heads, and fairytale pictures of the robber-swallow in an oak, opening wide his right eye to receive the arrow of Ilya-Muromets. Yasha would bring out from the trunk a whole collection of coats, waistcoats, topcoats, fur-caps, cups and saucers, wire boxes ornamented with false pearls and with transfer pictures of flowers, and little circular mirrors. Sometimes, from a side pocket of the trunk, he would bring out an apple or a couple of buns strewn with poppy-seed, which we always found especially appetising.

Yasha was usually very precise and careful. Once he broke a large decanter and my father scolded him for it. The next day Yasha appeared with two new decanters. "I daresay I shall break another one," he explained, "and anyhow we can find a use for the two somehow." He kept all the rooms of the house in perfect cleanliness and order. He was very jealous of all his rights and duties, and he was firmly convinced that no one could clean the floors as well as he. At one time he had a great quarrel with a new housemaid, Yevka, as to which of them could clean out a room better. We were called in as expert judges, and in order to tease Yasha a little we gave the palm to Yevka. But children as we were, we didn't know the human soul, and we little suspected what a cruel blow this was to Yasha. He went out of the room without saying a word, and next day everybody in the village knew that Yasha was drunk.

Yasha used to get drunk about two or three times a year, and these were times of great unhappiness for him and for all the family. There was nobody then to chop wood, to feed the

horses, to bring in water. For five or six days we lost sight of Yasha and heard nothing of his doings. On the seventh day he came back without hat or coat and in a dreadful condition. A crowd of noisy Jews followed about thirty paces behind him, and ragged urchins called names after him and made faces. They all knew that Yasha was going to hold an auction.

Yasha came into the house, and then in a minute or so ran out again into the street, carrying in his arms almost all the contents of his trunk. The crowd came round him quickly.

“How’s that? You won’t give me any more vodka, won’t you?” he shouted, shaking out trousers and waistcoats and holding them up in his hands. “What, I haven’t any more money, eh? How much for this? and this, and this?”

And one after another he flung his garments among the crowd, who snatched at them with tens of rapacious fingers.

“How much’ll you give?” Yasha shouted to one of the Jews who had possessed himself of a coat—“how much’ll you give, mare’s head?”

“We-ll, I’ll give you fifty copecks,” drawled the Jew, his eyes staring.

“Fifty copecks, fifty?” Yasha seemed to fall into a frenzy of despair. “I don’t want fifty copecks. Why not say twenty? Give me gold! What’s this? Towels? Give me ten copecks for the lot, eh? Oh that you had died of fever! Oh that you had died when you were young!”

Our village has its policeman, but his duties consist mainly in standing as godfather to the farmers’ children, and on such an

occasion as this “the police” took no share in quelling the disorder, but acted the part of a modest and silent looker-on. But my father, seeing the plunder of Yasha’s property, could no longer restrain his rage and contempt. “He’s got drunk again, the idiot, and now he’ll lose all his goods,” said he, unselfishly hurling himself into the crowd. In a second the people were gone and he found himself alone with Yasha, holding in his hands some pitiful-looking razor-case or other. Yasha staggered in astonishment, helplessly raising his eyebrows, and then he suddenly fell heavily on his knees.

“Master! My own dear master! See what they’ve done to me!”

“Go off into the shed,” ordered my father angrily, pulling himself away from Yasha, who had seized the tail of his coat and was kissing it. “Go into the shed and sleep off your drunkenness so that tomorrow even the smell of you may be gone!”

Yasha went away humbly into the shed, and then began for him those tormenting hours of getting sober, the deep and oppressive torture of repentance. He lay on his stomach and rested his head on the palms of his hands, staring fixedly at some point in front of him. He knew perfectly well what was taking place in the house. He could picture to himself how we were all begging my father to forgive him, and how my father would impatiently wave his hands and refuse to listen. He knew very well that probably this time my father would be implacable.

Every now and then we children would be impelled by curiosity to go and listen at the door of the shed, and we would hear

strange sounds as of bellowing and sobbing.

In such times of affliction and degradation Bouton counted it his moral duty to be in attendance upon the suffering Yasha. The sagacious creature knew very well that ordinarily when Yasha was sober he would never be allowed to show any sign of familiarity towards him. Whenever he met the stern figure of Yasha in the yard Bouton would put on an air of gazing attentively into the distance of being entirely occupied in snapping at flies. We children used to fondle Bouton and feed him occasionally, we used to pull the burrs out of his shaggy coat while he stood in patient endurance, we even used to kiss him on his cold, wet nose. And I always wondered that Bouton's sympathy and devotion used to be given entirely to Yasha, from whom he seemed to get nothing but kicks. Now, alas! when bitter experience has taught me to look all round and on the under side of things, I begin to suspect that the source of Bouton's devotion was not really enigmatical—it was Yasha who fed Bouton every day, and brought him his dish of scraps after dinner.

In ordinary times, I say, Bouton would never have risked forcing himself upon Yasha's attention. But in these days of repentance he went daringly into the shed and planted himself by the side of Yasha, staring into a corner and breathing deeply and sympathetically. If this seemed to do no good, he would begin to lick his patron's face and hands, timidly at first, but afterwards boldly and more boldly. It would end by Yasha putting his arms round Bouton's neck and sobbing, then Bouton would insinuate himself by degrees under Yasha's body,

and the voices of the two would mingle in a strange and touching duet.

Next day Yasha came into the house at early dawn, gloomy and downcast. He cleaned the floor and the furniture and put everything into a state of shining cleanliness ready for the coming of my father, the very thought of whom made Yasha tremble. But my father was not to be appeased. He handed Yasha his wages and his passport and ordered him to leave the place at once. Prayers and oaths of repentance were vain.

Then Yasha resolved to take extreme measures.

“So it means you’re sending me away, sir, does it?” he asked boldly.

“Yes, and at once.”

“Well then, I won’t go. You send me away now, and you’ll simply all die off like beetles. I won’t go. I’ll stay years!”

“I shall send for the policeman to take you off.”

“Take me off,” said Yasha in amazement. “Well, let him. All the town knows that I’ve served you faithfully for twenty years, and then I’m sent off by the police. Let them take me. It won’t be shame to me but to you, sir!”

And Yasha really stayed on. Threats had no effect upon him. He paid no attention to them, but worked untiringly in an exaggerated way, trying to make up for lost time. That night he didn’t go into the kitchen to sleep, but lay down in Matsko’s stall, and the horse stood up all night, afraid to move and unable to be down in his accustomed place. My father was a good-natured and indolent man, who easily submitted himself

to surrounding circumstances and to people and things with which he was familiar. By the evening he had forgiven Yasha.

Yasha was a handsome man, of a fair, Little-Russian, melancholy type. Young men and girls looked admiringly at him, but not one of them running like a quail across the yard would have dared to give him a playful punch in the side or even an inviting smile—there was too much haughtiness in him and icy contempt for the fair sex. And the delights of a family hearth seemed to have little attraction for him. “When a woman establishes herself in a cottage,” he used to say intolerantly, “the air becomes bad at once.” However, he did once make a move in that direction, and then he surprised us more than ever before. We were seated at tea one evening when Yasha came into the dining-room. He was perfectly sober, but his face wore a look of agitation, and pointing mysteriously with his thumb over his shoulder towards the door, he asked in a whisper, “Can I bring them in?”

“Who is it?” asked father. “Let them come in.”

All eyes were turned in expectation towards the door, from behind which there crept a strange being. It was a woman of over fifty years of age, ragged, drunken, degraded and foolish-looking.

“Give us your blessing, sir, we’re going to be married,” said Yasha, dropping on his knees. “Get down on your knees, fool,” cried he, addressing the woman and pulling her roughly by the sleeve.

My father with difficulty overcame his astonishment. He talked

to Yasha long and earnestly, and told him he must be going out of his mind to think of marrying such a creature. Yasha listened in silence, not getting up from his knees; the silly woman knelt too all the time.

“So you don’t allow us to marry, sir?” asked Yasha at last.

“Not only do I not allow you, but I’m quite sure you won’t do such a thing,” answered my father.

“That means that I won’t,” said Yasha resolutely. “Get up, you fool,” said he, turning to the woman. “You hear what the master says. Go away at once.”

And with these words he hauled the unexpected guest away by the collar, and they both went quickly out of the room.

This was the only attempt Yasha made towards the state of matrimony. Each of us explained the affair to ourselves in our own way, but we never understood it fully, for whenever we asked Yasha further about it, he only waved his hands in vexation.

Still more mysterious and unexpected was his death. It happened so suddenly and enigmatically and had apparently so little connection with any previous circumstance in Yasha’s life that if I were forced to recount what happened I feel I couldn’t do it at all well. Yet all the same, I am confident that what I say really took place, and that none of the clear impression of it is at all exaggerated.

One day, in the railway station three versts from the village, a certain well-dressed young man, a passenger from one of the trains, hanged himself in a lavatory. Yasha at once asked my

father if he might go and see the body.

Four hours later he returned and went straight into the dining-room—we had visitors at the time—and stood by the door. It was only two days after one of his drinking bouts and repentance in the shed, and he was quite sober.

"What is it?" asked my mother.

Yasha suddenly burst into a guffaw. "*He—he—he*," said he. "His tongue was all hanging out.... The gentleman...."

My father ordered him into the kitchen. Our guests talked a little about Yasha's idiosyncrasies and then soon forgot about the little incident. Next day, about eight o'clock in the evening, Yasha went up to my little sister in the nursery and kissed her.

"Goodbye, missy."

"Goodbye, Yasha," answered the little one, not looking up from her doll.

Half an hour later Yevka, the housemaid, ran into my father's study, pale and trembling.

"Oh, sir... there... in the attic... he's hanged himself... Yasha...."

And she fell down in a swoon.

On a nail in the attic hung the lifeless body of Yasha.

When the coroner questioned the cook, she said that Yasha's manner had been very strange on the day of his death.

"He stood before the looking-glass," said she, "and pressed his hands so tightly round his neck that his face went quite red and his tongue stuck out and his eyes bulged.... He must have been seeing what he would look like."

The coroner brought in a verdict of “suicide while in a state of unsound mind.”

Yasha was buried in a special grave dug for the purpose in the ravine on the other side of the wood. Next day Bouton could not be found anywhere. The faithful dog had run off to the grave and lay there howling, mourning the death of his austere friend. Afterwards he disappeared and we never saw him again.

And now that I myself am nearly what may be called an old man, I go over my varied recollections now and then, and when I come to the thought of Yasha, every time I say to myself: “What a strange soul—faithful, pure, contradictory, absurd—and great. Was it not a truly Slav soul that dwelt in the body of Yasha?”